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ABSTRACT

The magnitude and importance of nonpolitical speech ghostwriting as a public relations activity was investigated. Corporate public relations departments and public relations counseling firms with more than five members that are listed in the directory of the Public Relations Society of America received a questionnaire asking seven questions about their speech writing duties. Returned questionnaires were divided into corporate departments and counseling firms, and percentages of responses for each item were calculated. The results indicated that speech ghostwriting is an important function of most public relations organizations. Even though most of the speech specialists seem to be employed in corporate departments, the counseling firms indicated that more than half of their writers work on more than five speeches per year. These data indicate that those who seek jobs in the public relations profession would find a knowledge of speechwriting advantageous. (TO)

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Speech Writing a Major Public Relations Activity?

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Speech Writing a Major Public Relations Activity?

Problem

Since the days of the ancient Greek Sophists speech ghostwriting has been an accepted norm in politics. The art has gained such wide usage that modern scholars are often faced with the task of separating speech writer and speaker when analysing rhetorical content. Some "ghosts" have even gained fame along with their political candidate, such as Theodore Sorrensen who authored much of John Kennedy's "Rhetoric of the New Frontier". Less and less today public figures try to withhold the fact that they rely on others to bear the major burden of speech writing for their busy agenda. In fact, good arguments could be made to support the use of "ghosts" by public officials who wish to make prudent use of their time. People occupying public office are called upon to make so many speeches that to research and write them all would leave very little time for the actual business of their office.

With the professional speech writer being in such demand, it is surprising that so little is known about the job or the people performing it. A study reported by Douglas P. Starr in the March, 1971 issue of the Public Relations Journal points to the fact that little detailed study has been done concerning ghostwriting as a profession (Starr, 1971, p. 10). His investigation, dealing with speech writers in the Florida state capital, reveals that most "ghosts" are members of public relations staffs. Starr's report also indicated that most speech writers found their way into the profession

by accident, discovering that it was part of the duties expected of public relations practitioners.

The findings of the Florida study lead to questions about the extent of speech writing in the public relations profession as a whole. Can speech writing be considered a major public relations function? Should schools be preparing their public relations students to better fulfill this function? In an attempt to answer these questions the present study was formulated to investigate nonpolitical ghostwriting. It would seem logical that busy corporation executives have very little time to devote to the research and composition of speeches. However, in this era of public responsibility and consumer awareness it has become more important than ever that corporate executives become effective spokesmen for their companies point of view. Therefore, the same pressures of time and public responsibility that forced the politician to seek expert help in speech writing also seem to be affecting the modern corporation executive. Just as the politician turns to his Ghostwriter, the public relations department or outside couseling firm would seem to be the place for the executive to obtain the needed expertise. The following research was conducted to determine the magnitude and importance of speech writing as a public relations activity.

Method

The directory of the Public Relations Society of America was used to select recipients of a survey questionnaire. Corporate public relations departments and public relations counseling firms listing more than five members were selected (N=155). The questionnaire was then mailed to the senior officer or department head listed with instructions to pass the instrument on if the recipient did not feel qualified to respond. The

respondent was asked to fill out the seven items giving a variety of responses varying from yes-no to providing the number of staff members who would fall into certain categories. The specific questions asked were:

1. Does your firm or department ever write or help to write speeches for clients or officials of the company?

2. How many employees in your firm or department are called upon at any time to participate in speech writing activities? How many have speech writing as their primary duty?

3. How many speeches per year are these individuals called upon to help prepare?

4. What are the general titles held by persons involved in speech writing in your organization?

5. For what duties other than speech writing are these employees responsible?

6. What are the educational backgrounds of the above persons?

7. Please indicate how many of the above persons fit into each range of years of experience in the public relations profession? 1-4; 5-9; 10 or more.

Returned questionnaires were divided into two groups: corporate departments and counseling firms. Responses for each item were tabulated and percentages were calculated based on the total number in each group. Using the calculated percentages, the two groups were compared on an item by item basis and conclusions were drawn from these comparisons.

Results

Of the 155 questionnaires mailed, 44% (68) were returned in useable condition (45 corporations, 23 firms). In response to the first item 95% of the respondents indicated that their organization did participate in the preparation of speeches for clients or corporate executives. A

breakdown of the numbers between counseling firms and corporate departments yeilded similar results. 95% of each group responded affirmatively.

Table 1

Number of employees in responding corporations and firms who participate in speech writing activities.

	Total Speech Writers N=359	Specialists N=46
Corporate P.R. Dept.	203 (56.6%)	39 (84.4%)
P.R. Counseling Firm	156 (43.4%)	7 (15.2%)

From the 95% who indicated that they did participate in speech writing activities 359 speech writers were tabulated with 46 of these being designated as practioners for whom speech writing is their primary duty (Table 1). It should be noted that corporate P.R departments returned 66.2% of the affirmative questionnaires while counseling firms returned only 33.8%. However, 43.4% of the reported speech writers were from counseling firms while only 56.6% were reported by the corporate departments. Therefore the counseling firms averaged just over 7 speech writers each while the corporate departments averaged less than 5 speech writers each. However, the corporate public relations departments held a much higher percentage (84.8%) of the total number of speech specialists reported with the counseling firms reporting only 15.2% of the total. Moreover, 20% of the 203 speech writers reported by corporations were specialists while only 5% of the 156 counseling firms' speech writers were designated as specialists. It would appear form this data that most practitioners at public relations counseling firms might be called upon to help prepare a speech. Corporate departments on the other hand tend to have fewer practioners who participate in speech writing perhaps resulting from the existance of more specialists who carry most of the load.

Table 2

Comparative number of speeches employees in P.R. firms and corporate departments work on each year.

Number of speeches per year	Corp. Dept. N=203	P.R. Firms N=156
1-3	15.8%	21.1%
3-5	23.2%	25.7%
5-10	22.2%	16.1%
more than 10	39.0%	37.2%

Again pointing out the apparent specialized nature of corporate departments is the fact that their speech writers produce more speeches per year than those in a counseling firm. According to the responses indicated in Table 2, 61.2% of the corporate writers work on 5 or more speeches per year while only 53.3% of the counseling firm writers perform at that level. Combining both groups it would be noticed that 38.2% of the 359 speech writers reported worked on more that 10 speeches per year. This fact is particularly interesting in view of the data in Table 1 which indicate that only 12.8% (46) of the combined total were reported as speech specialists. Indications seem to strongly suggest that the general public relations professional does a great deal of speech writing in addition to his other duties.

Responses to question number four regarding the general titles held by persons involved in speech writing proved to be so broad that no trend or pattern could be detected. Such titles seem to vary greatly from organization to organization.

Table 3

Comparison of other jobs performed by speech writers in corporate departments and P.R. firms.

Job Classification*	Corp. Dept. N=43	P.R. Firms N=22
Writing	90.7%	100 0%
Editing	79.1%	81.8%
Placement	32.6%	77.3%
Promotion	30.2%	40.9%
Speaking	32.6%	27.3%
Production	44.2%	27.3%
Programming	27.9%	45.5%
Institutional Advertising	27.9%	22.7%
Other	34.9%	22.7%

*Eight major job classifications as published by the Public Relations Society of America.

Table 3 shows that of the eight major job classifications published by the Public Relations Society of America all are apt to be part of a speech writers duties. The most frequently indicated classifications for public relations counseling firms were writing (100%), editing (81.8%), placement (77.3%) and programming (45.5%). Corporate public relations departments indicated writing (90.7%), editing (79.1%) and production (44.2%). As expected, writing and editing were the most often indicated jobs for both types of organizations, however, the other classifications provided an interesting comparison. Placement was a job that 77.3% of the counseling firms indicated as being part of the speech writer's job. however, only 32.6% of the corporations chose this classification. Likewise 45.5% of the counseling firms said programming was done by speech writers compared to 27.9% of the corporations. On the other hand corporate departments indicated production 44.2% to 27.3% over the counseling firms. This difference in emphasis beyond the primary duties of writing and editing seems to reflect functional differences between the two types of public relations practices. It should also be noted that none of the eight classifications were ranked below 22.7% indicating that most speech writers

are expected to function in a wide range of jobs.

Table 4

Comparative educational backgrounds of corporate department and counseling firm speech writers.

Educational Background	Corp. Dept. N=203	P.R. Firms N=156
No college degree	10.4%	3.2%
Bachelor's degree - Business	6.4%	10.9%
Bachelor's degree - Journalism	43.4%	33.4%
Bachelor's degree - Speech	1.5%	0
Bachelor's degree - Other	22.7%	24.2%
Master's degree - Business	2.0%	7.7%
Master's degree - Journalism	5.5%	8.4%
Master's degree - Speech	.05%	0
Master's degree - Other	7.9%	5.2%

In terms of education the typical public relations speech writer is a college graduate with a degree in Journalism (table 4). Degrees in Speech are almost non-existant among these professionals although many of them have probably experienced some formal training in public speaking. Still it is significant that while 20% of the corporate speech writers are specialists only 1.5% actually have a college degree in the discipline. This can possibly be explained by the fact earlier noted that most speech writers are journalistically trained public relations practitioners who become speech writers almost by accident. Next to Journalism, the most frequently indicated classification was "other". Organizations responding to this category listed a wide variety of educational backgrounds ranging from Fine Arts to Chemical Engineering.

Table 5

Comparative years of experience in the public relations profession for speech writers in corporate departments and P.R. firms.

Years of Experience	Corp. Dept. N=203	P.R. Firm N=156
1-4	8.9%	10.9%
5-9	22.7%	35.9%
10 or more	68.5%	53.2%

In terms of experience in the profession (table 5) the majority of speech writers have been in public relations for ten or more years. This amount of experience seems to indicate that speech writing is a public relations function of the highest caliber and priority. Certainly such a large number of experienced practitioners would not be engaged in an activity that was not a vital one in terms of the overall public relations function of their organization.

Discussion

The results of this study would indicate that speech ghostwriting is indeed an important function of most public relations organizations. Even though most of the speech specialists seem to be employed in corporate departments the counseling firms indicate that over half of their writers work on more than five speeches per year. This coupled with the large number of experienced professionals who engage in speech preparation would seem to justify more detailed investigation. Certainly the data collected here should be enough to convince those who seek jobs in the public relations profession that a knowledge of speech writing is an advantage. But some questions remain unanswered in this area: What type of preparation would best provide this knowledge? How does the writing of speeches differ from other types of writing and editing? Should those who aspire to specialize in speech writing be trained differently from other public relations professionals? However, what can be said from the present study is that speech writing is a major public relations function by virtue of its widespread and large scale practice.

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